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C O R R E C T E D C O P Y S I G N A T U R E

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL KDEM AF  
SUBJECT: HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE U.S. STRATEGY: AFGHAN CIVIL  
SOCIETY INFERS DISINTEREST

Classified By: Political Counselor  
Annie Pforzheimer for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Since President Obama's December 1 strategy speech, members of Afghan civil society have repeatedly voiced concern that the President's scant mention of human rights signaled to the Afghan government that the international community is no longer concerned with protecting human rights, and in particular women's rights, in Afghanistan. Afghan civil society representatives have more recently expressed their disappointment in President Karzai's failure to appoint more women ministers to the new cabinet he named on December 19, and some link this to the U.S. policy's perceived disinterest in women's rights. End Summary.

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The New U.S. Strategy: What about the Women?  
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¶2. (C) In a series of separate meetings in the first weeks of December, women civil society representatives, NGO directors, and MPs have told Embassy officials they were disappointed with the lack of emphasis on human rights, and in particular, women's rights, in President Obama's December 1 strategy speech. At an Embassy-hosted reception in honor of International Human Rights Day on December 10, Sima Samar, chairperson of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, lamented the rhetorical shift away from protecting and advancing human and women's rights in Afghanistan under the Obama administration. Speaking on behalf of the assembled human rights activists, Samar said she feared President Obama's failure to mention Afghan women sent a signal to the Afghan government that Afghanistan no longer needs to focus on protecting women's rights. Numerous other guests, including MP Fawzia Koofi (Tajik, Badakhshan) falsely asserted that President Obama had not mentioned human rights at all in his December 1 speech. (Note: Embassy Officials corrected this misconception and sent copies of the December 1 speech to several guests.)

¶3. (C) As there is little support for women's rights among Afghan male leaders, many civil society activists view international support as crucial. During a meeting on December 5, Manizha Naderi, the Afghan-American director of the NGO Women for Afghan Women told Congresswoman Laura Richardson that she was alarmed by the omission of women's rights in President Obama's strategy speech. She told the Congresswoman that without continued emphasis on the importance of protecting women's basic rights in Afghanistan, Afghan women would be in danger of losing the progress they have made since 2001. Separately, MP Shinkai Karokhail (Pashtun, Kabul), told us on December 16 that "President Obama needs to mention women or the (Afghan) men will think the United States has forgotten," and will no longer expend any energy on protecting women's rights.

New Cabinet; Same Token Woman

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¶4. (C) On December 20, one day after Karzai announced his list of proposed ministers, a group of women's rights activists held a press conference at Afghan Women's Network to protest the male-dominated list Karzai sent to parliament.

Prominent activists, including Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission Chairperson Sima Samar and Afghan Red Crescent President Fatima Gailani, had spent several months lobbying President Karzai to include competent women in his cabinet. According to many women activists, Karzai had promised he would appoint three to five women to ministerial level positions. The activists were disappointed and angered when President Karzai revealed his nearly-completed list of proposed ministers, and Hosn Bano Ghazanfar, the incumbent Minister of Women's Affairs whom most consider weak, was the only woman on the list. (Comment: This reflects Karzai's frequent inclination to speak positively to liberals but to favor conservatives. The fact that his own wife is rarely seen in public is seen here as further evidence of his true personal convictions.)

¶5. (C) In private meetings with Charge Ricciardone on December 20 and 21, both Sima Samar and Bamyan Governor Habiba Sarobi told the Charge they were disappointed in Karzai's nomination list. Samar elaborated on the December 20 press conference, and said the group of women had called on both female and male MPs to tolerate the lack of women in Karzai's proposed list of ministers. Sarobi questioned why there had been more women in the transitional government than there are in the current government. She specified the need for women to be given leadership positions in strong ministries, and told Ricciardone "we don't want just a piece of cake, we want the whole cake," in reference to Karzai's proposal to create a separate Ministry of Literacy headed by a woman, carved out of the Ministry of Education.

¶6. (C) Following the December 20 press conference, Karzai announced that he planned to appoint more women to his cabinet. On December 23 he sent Wazhma Batur Hassan Zurmati's name to Parliament as his proposal to lead the new Ministry of Literacy.

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U.S. in the Lead on Women's Issues

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¶7. (C) Fairly or not, many Afghan women activists have connected President Obama's omission of women's issues with Karzai's initial failure to appoint more women to ministerial level positions. Governor Sarobi told Charge Ricciardone that "President Obama is making policy for the world... so what will happen with human rights and women's rights if the United States is not paying attention?" While Afghan civil society continues to work hard on its own to promote human rights and advance women's issues, they have repeatedly stressed to us the important role that U.S. government plays in supporting their causes.

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